



## Tracing Ancestry in Scotland's Nonconformist Church Records

Phillip Dunn, Sr. British Research Specialist, Scotland AG®

FamilySearch.org

[dunnpb@familysearch.org](mailto:dunnpb@familysearch.org)

### Introduction: Key points in Nonconformist research

- All non-Church of Scotland were considered Nonconformists; they comprised—
  1. Seceders or secessionists (outsider Presbyterians of the Church of Scotland—which was also Presbyterian in its form of worship)
  2. Dissenter or other churches or those who disassociated themselves from Presbyterianism and the Church of Scotland
- Online reference tools that help you identify church registers and their locations include:
  1. [www.nrscotland.gov.uk/catalogue](http://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/catalogue) - type the town/parish name in the *Search for* box; and then type “CH3” or “CH10”, or “11” or “12”, etc to “16”; or “RH4” or “RH21” in the *Reference* box; clicking a single entry shows the archive where the record's located.
  2. [www.Scotlandsplaces.gov.uk](http://www.Scotlandsplaces.gov.uk)
- Internet Sources: Online offerings currently leans heavily in heavy favor of government-sponsored **Church of Scotland** whose registers hold but few marriages, very few burials—and even fewer—baptisms—of Nonconformists among Scotland's people.
- Up to 1800, Nonconformists covered about 40 percent of Scotland's population, and was by this time quickly gaining ground
- By 1851: Nonconformists, including all the Seceder Churches comprised a whopping 60 percent of the people of Scotland
- Seceder churches and Nonconformist church registers—to a fair but fractional extent—may be found at the National Archives of Scotland. Roman Catholic parish registers have been recently centralized, scanned and imaged and mostly indexed; other than these two, no other Nonconformist religions has a full complement of its church registers indexed or accessible via online at ScotlandsPeople.
  - The only other Scottish Church records database available outside of ScotlandsPeople is FamilySearch's Scottish Church records Index/database - the old (DOS) OPR—extracted from original Church of Scotland records from early to 1854. This database contains **no** burials.
  - The Church of Scotland database does however *include some Nonconformist church registers*. [Note: The latter nonconformist church register indexes are **not** a part of nor incorporated into the Scotlandspeople.gov.uk website]

The Scottish Church Records database is available only at:

- Family History Library

- Family History Centers
- Scotlandspeople (FamilySearch.org shared its computerized indexes; but ScotlandsPeople indexed the extant burial registers)

## **DYNAMICS OF SCOTLAND'S NONCONFORMIST POPULATION**

### **Scottish Nonconformist ("dissenters") Churches/congregations includes tot: 774**

1. Independent (Congregationalists) - 192
2. Scottish Episcopal Church - 134
3. Roman Catholic - 117
4. Baptist - 119
5. Methodist churches - 82
6. LDS – at FamilySearch – 20
7. Unitarians – abt 13
8. Quaker – 6
9. Others total: 91

### **Scottish Seceder (Secessionists splinter groups) Churches (includes 1,438 total)**

Seceder churches may be broken down into—

Reformed Presbyterian Church – 39 churches (from 1690)

1. Associate Synod – (from 1733; split in 1747)
2. Original Secession Church – 36 churches (from 1827)
3. Relief Church – 2 churches (from 1761)
4. United Presbyterian Church – 427 churches (from 1820)
5. Free Church – 889 churches (from 1843)

**Total: 2,212**

### **Scottish Seceder (Secessioner) Churches/Congregation records include:**

- |                                     |   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Baptisms                         | 6. Presbytery records – lots of details         |
| 2. Marriages/proclamations          | 7. Synod records                                |
| 3. Burials (few survive/were kept)  | 8. Finance records                              |
| 4. Communion rolls – resident names | 9. *Kirk Session records – give lots of details |
| 5. Minutes                          |   |

### **Scottish Seceder (Presbyterian) Church Records locations:**

Location of Seceder church registers:

1. National Records of Scotland (visit: [www.nrscotland.gov.uk](http://www.nrscotland.gov.uk)) – see their online Catalogue under a) the name of the parish, b) then type "CH3", "CH13" and "CH16" for deposited church registers
2. Any regional or city archive usually has holdings of church registers for many seceder churches and dissenter churches

Online indexes for Seceder & dissenter churches:

Sadly, few church registers for Seceder or Presbyterian splinter churches nor of dissenter church registers have been centralized, scanned/imaged, and then indexed! NRS has not chosen to do so with the partial collections they hold. Though some formidable

comprehensive lists have been compiled and maintained over decades to identify and catalog them, i.e. the Scottish Genealogical Society, SP has made no move to centralize, image and index them as they have with the Church of Scotland parish registers.

Roman Catholic (ScotlandsPeople) and LDS (FamilySearch.org) are excepted – both of which have recently been completed

### **Kirk Sessions – Church of Scotland & Seceder Churches (CH3, CH13; CH16):**

- “Kirk Sessions” = church courts
- Contain numerous references to our ancestors for all kinds of ‘infractions’
- Were kept on a parish level
- Don’t always exist/survive
- Scanned and imaged (but *not* indexed)
- *May be viewed only at Scotland’s National Archives and/or selected (abt 15) regional archives in Scotland*
- A rich treasure-trove on *especially* Nonconformists! A “must-use” record source

### **Independent or Congregationalists (CH14):**

Church history:

- Introduced as early as 1707 by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel
- Wasn’t established until 1790s
- Over 100 congregations by the setup of the Congregational Union - 1813
- Independents or Congregationalists were not known for record-keeping.

How to search Congregational/Independent church registers:

1. Search extant church registers at the National Records of Scotland ([www.nrscotland.gov.uk](http://www.nrscotland.gov.uk)) – see their online Catalogue under “CH14”
2. Search at local regional and city archives
3. Search Church of Scot. and Reformed Presbyterian Church registers as well
4. Search at/visit: ScotlandsPeople Centre, Edinburgh which has a few holdings

### **Scottish Episcopal Church records (CH12)**

- In 1689-1690 over 2/3’s or 900 parish ministers were mostly replaced by Presbyterian ministers
- Registers begin mostly after the Scottish Episcopalian Act – in 1711
- By 1791 only about 40 parishes exist but grew to over 100 by 1851

### **Scottish Episcopal registers locations:**

- The National Records of Scotland – has many lowland church registers, i.e. Edinburgh
- City and regional Archives across Scotland
- Other –
  - University of Aberdeen Special Collections Centre
  - University of Dundee’s Archive Services
  - For more, see—

1. <http://archiveshub.ac.uk> – catalogue to 2500 archives and libraries
2. <http://nrscotland.gov.uk> – type CH3, or CH10-16; or RH4 or RH21 (Roman Catholic Church in Scotland)

Scotland was Roman Catholic up until early 16<sup>th</sup> century; then turned Episcopalian and sometimes Presbyterian when until at least 1690, Presbyterianism permanently replaced it

### **ScotlandsPeople.gov.uk:**

- Holds scanned images and Catholic Parish registers
- Has published for online searches (most of) the indexes to these registers; earliest begin 1703

### **Baptist Church in Scotland**

- 10 chapels or congregations (only) have existed in Scotland

Location of records:

Baptist Union of Scotland  
12 Aytoun Road  
Glasgow G41 5RT  
Scotland

### **Methodists in Scotland (CH11):**

Started as a 'movement' within the Episcopalian (Church of England) Church, but became a full-fledged religion by the 1780's with but few chapels built

For records accessibility, visit:

1. [www.nrscotland.gov.uk](http://www.nrscotland.gov.uk)
2. Online catalogs to regional/city archives which have Methodist records of various groups
3. [www.scotlandspoplehub.gov.uk/pdf/church-Methodist-pdf](http://www.scotlandspoplehub.gov.uk/pdf/church-Methodist-pdf)

### **The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons):**

- First came to Scotland in, and established the first congregation (branch) in 1839.
- Location of church (branch) records are available through FamilySearch.org's FHCs or Family History Centers worldwide.
- Search for branch records in the online catalogue under the name[s] of the civil parish. If not available in the desired parish, search all of the contiguous parishes.
- By about 1900, there were nearly 100 branches of the church in Scotland.
- Most of these records have been indexed prior to 1905

### **Unitarian Church (CH15):**

- Was established by the 1790's
- Total of 13 churches founded in Scotland
- Records are held at the National Records of Scotland – see [www.nrscotland.gov.uk](http://www.nrscotland.gov.uk); search under "CH15" to access these registers.
- Additional records may be held at local regional/city archives as well; see their online catalogs/collections for further access details

## **Society of Friends or Quakers (CH10):**

- First congregation was founded in the 1650's at Lanarkshire (Dunbartonshire)
- Records are located under "CH10/1-4" at the National Records of Scotland ([www.nrscotland.gov.uk](http://www.nrscotland.gov.uk)) – see their catalogue

## **HISTORICAL EVENTS AFFECTING NONCOFORMIST RESEARCH**

- 1690 - Reformed Church of Scotland was formed; many left the Kirk to join
- 1691 – by this year, the Church of Scotland (a Presbyterian-based church) was governmentally established as the state church
- The Episcopal Church was mostly dissolved from 1692, although some ministers somehow retained their ministries
- The Episcopalians Act of Parliament, in 1711 afforded many Episcopalian ministers to regain their parish churches lost in 1690; it was also the year Roman Catholic parish registers mostly began
- 1733 – Associate Synod Church was formed
- 1747 – Associate Synod broke into 1) General Assoc. or Anti-burghers Presb. Church, 2) Associate Synod or Burghers Church; complaints were over patronage rights
- 1761 – Relief Presbyterian Church was started
- 1820 – United Association Secession Church commenced
- 1827 Original Secession Synod began
- Disruption of 1843-1847: nearly half (about 700 churches) of the kirk walked away from the established church and formed the United Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland; i.e. of Dundee's 17 original Church of Scotland parishes—8 turned to Seceder (mostly Free) Church congregations by 1847.

## **KEY WEBSITES**

1. [www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk) – many nonconformists in marriages, burials & some baptisms; has Roman Catholic database for all of Scotland
2. [www.scotlandsplaces.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandsplaces.gov.uk) -
3. [www.nrscotland.gov.uk/catalogue](http://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/catalogue)
4. [www.scotlandspeoplehub.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandspeoplehub.gov.uk)
5. [www.electricscotland.com/HISTORY/statistical/index.htm](http://www.electricscotland.com/HISTORY/statistical/index.htm) - parish histories (names churches)
6. [www.british-history.ac.uk](http://www.british-history.ac.uk) – click Historical Geography; then "Topographical Dictionary"

